

Exploring the role of English language and mapping its uses for postgraduate students in Saudi universities

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate the contributing role of English language usage among postgraduate students in Saudi universities, mapping its diverse applications within their academic pursuits.

Design/methodology/approach – A mixed method approach was utilized employing a sequential explanatory design operationalized through a 28-item questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. A total number of 71 Saudi postgraduate students from 18 universities participated in the study.

Findings – The findings: (1) revealed that English language proficiency is necessary for postgraduate studies in different disciplines and (2) identified the broad applications of English for postgraduate students in Saudi universities.

Research limitations/implications – Since the findings of this study cannot be generalized because of the small size of participants, future research may investigate larger groups including postgraduate students from different nationalities studying in Saudi Arabia.

Practical implications – The study findings can be considered by Postgraduate programs planners and developers to take practical actions to enhance postgraduate students' English language Proficiency.

Originality/value – Postgraduate students encounter numerous challenges during their academic journey, spanning institutional dynamics, supervisory relationships, academic skills development and personal abilities. Among these challenges, proficiency in the English language stands out prominently. In today's globalized context, English exerts an undeniable influence, particularly for postgraduate scholars pursuing Diplomas, Masters or Ph.D. degrees. This significance arises from the immersive nature of scientific research which involves a myriad of academic tasks such as assignments, dissertations and presentations. Consequently, this study aims to investigate the contributing role of English language usage among postgraduate students in Saudi universities, mapping its diverse applications within their academic pursuits.

Keywords Postgraduate studies, English proficiency, Applications of English

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

English has proven to be the international language for communication and documentation in various disciplines. English language education has drastically changed over the past several decades, going from being taught as a foreign language to being used as a medium of instruction (Dearden, 2014). Yet, as part of the new educational policy in Saudi Arabia, English has become the medium of instruction in all scientific departments. To facilitate this transition, a Preparatory Year Program (PYP) and English language centers have been initiated and established in most of the Saudi universities (Shah *et al.*, 2013; Alharbi, 2019). This is because English is substantially utilized in the domain of education for miscellaneous purposes such as academic and scientific research. Nowadays, postgraduate studies require effective written and oral communicative skills in order to carry out the assigned tasks effectively and rigorously (Cooksey and McDonald, 2019). These tasks include writing research papers, dissertations, modules assignments and research findings presentations that



necessitate postgraduate students to be aware of the constituents of the English language and use it proficiently.

Lekhetho (2022) proclaimed that one of the draining problems for postgraduate students is low English language proficiency. In light of this, Khan (2013) ultimately reached the conclusion that postgraduate students need English language courses in which English is the medium of teaching. This exposes the problem of the study, which is the challenges that arise from limited English proficiency for postgraduate students in Saudi Arabia. These problems are conducive to assignments delays, incomplete comprehension of the subject matter and, thereby, dropping out due to the high-level of difficulty in studies sometimes. Furthermore, in light of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, there has been significant technological, economic, research and educational progress aimed at positioning the country as a global leader in scientific and academic research. This necessitates providing postgraduate students with access to knowledge, opportunities for international collaboration through conferences and workshops and the ability to publish in internationally recognized journals.

Thus, the principal aim of this study is to investigate the contributing role of English in enhancing the performance of Saudi postgraduate students and to highlight its diverse applications within their academic pursuits. As regards the significance of the study, it would add to the existing literature a proposed classification of the needs of English that is based on four categories: Knowledge, Skills, Attitude and Psychology and Research.

In this pursuit, the study attempts to answer the following questions:

- RQ1. To what extent is proficiency of English language important for postgraduate students and contributive to their studies in Saudi universities according to Saudi postgraduate students?
- RQ2. What are the uses and the benefits of English language for postgraduate students in Saudi universities according to Saudi postgraduate students?

2. Literature review

English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) is "The use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English" (Dearden, 2014, p. 4). Yet, it is a form of Content Based Learning (CBI) which is the umbrella term for EMI, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (Graham *et al.*, 2018; Carrió-Pastor, 2021). Moreover, with regard to the similarities and differences between EMI and CLIL, Carrió-Pastor (2021) stated that both methodologies share similar approaches and aim to enhance motivation, communication and understanding in English, though CLIL may be applied to any foreign language. CLIL, continues Carrió-Pastor (2021), is preferred to be used with students who obtain a lower English proficiency than those of EMI. That is why CLIL can be used with primary and secondary stages students whereas EMI can be used with university and postgraduate students (see Table 1). ESP, on the other hand, is an approach to English language teaching that focuses on the specific needs and goals of learners in different contexts and disciplines (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). It uses content from specific fields that carry the language intended to be taught to learners.

Macaro (2018) identified three motives for EMI in Higher Education (HE). First, it is an attractive way for lucrative foreign students who desire to attain internationally recognized degrees and certificates. Secondly, it is a way to enhance the reputation of the institution globally through internationalizing its profile and, finally, to encourage students' mobility. The occurrence of such an event has been a result of globalization as universities have been forced to compete in order to gain their market share and thrive internationally (Tsou and Kao, 2017). In this sense, Li and Wu (2017) stated that Higher Education institutes are required to examine

Table 1. Differences and similarities between CLIL and EMI

CLIL	EMI
1- It considers content and language learning	1- It considers only content learning; the language proficiency of students is taken for granted
2- Students enrolled in CLIL subjects do not need to be highly proficient in a foreign language	2- Students enrolled in EMI subjects should be highly proficient in English
3- Taught in primary school (reinforce language acquisition and proficiency)—taught in secondary school (reinforce language acquisition and proficiency)	3- Taught in bilingual secondary schools (for students with high language proficiency)
4- Content teachers trained in foreign language methodology teach the subjects	4- Taught in universities (for students with high language proficiency or international students)
5- Content teachers and language teachers should work together – materials should be designed by content and language teachers	5- Content teachers or language teachers trained in content teach the subjects
6- Methodology should be designed by content teachers and language teachers	6- Materials are designed by content teachers
7- Methodology follows communicative approach and content-based approach	7- Methodology designed by content teachers as language is not considered a priority
8- Assessment of content and language acquisition	8- Methodology follows communicative approach and content-based approach
	9- Assessment of only content acquisition

Source(s): Adapted from [Carrió-Pastor \(2021\)](#)

their EMI curricula on delivering the expected content as well as elevating their students’ English proficiency. Furthermore, EMI is viewed as a strategic choice to enhance academic interchange abroad, alumni employment, publications and quality of education ([Tsou and Kao, 2017](#)).

[Graham *et al.* \(2018\)](#) suggested two theories that explain the way CBI occurs and how to manage effectively. The first is Krashen’s Input hypothesis and the second is Swellers Cognitive Overload. The former argues that language acquisition occurs when the language presented to students does not exceed their English language proficiency ($i+1$) whereas the latter claims that learners should concentrate on only one source of information rather than several sources, otherwise, they will feel overwhelmed. To clarify, focusing on both, content and language, will cause cognitive overload on students. For this reason, learners must obtain a sufficient level of language to be able to fathom content for a successful occurrence of EMI which is a form of CBI.

[Al-Zubaidi and Rechards \(2010\)](#) reported that the language barrier affects postgraduate students’ academic achievements and college satisfaction as Communicative Language Ability (CLA) correlates positively with academic achievements and college satisfaction. [FarhanaYasmin and Ahmad \(2018\)](#) classified the challenges encountered by postgraduate students into four categories: (1) Dispositional (2) Situational, (3) Institutional and (4) Academic. The academic challenges were subdivided into the instructor’s role, poor communication skills and curriculum. According to these researchers, academic challenges include “oral expression and written expression, computer-related skills, critical and reflective skills, examinations and tests” (p. 114). Therefore, it is evident that language is one of the barriers that face non-native postgraduate students, especially in the Arab world.

English proficiency is found to be crucial for postgraduate students as it allows them to effectively participate in academic activities, including reading, writing and presenting research. This is especially important in fields where English is the primary medium of instruction and communication. Several recent studies approached the issues confronted by postgraduate students concerning their English language learning and proficiency. [Devi \(2023\)](#) attempted to investigate the relationship between Indonesian postgraduate students’ English language proficiency and their academic achievement. The results revealed that there

is a significant positive linear correlation between English language proficiency and academic achievement. [Ahmed et al. \(2017\)](#) explored the factors causing anxiety when speaking English among postgraduate students. The results showed that there are factors related to inter-language phonology, inter-language grammar and inter-language meaning. Yet, these factors had debilitating effects on their academic achievements. [Liu and Xiangming \(2019\)](#) argued similarly when they conducted a study to investigate the effects of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) on postgraduate students' performance over a period of 10 weeks. The participants showed a considerable decrease in their anxiety about speaking English by the end of the semester, anxiety was strongly correlated with students' performance in the English language exam and, finally, students' performance in the English language exam was strongly predicted by their anxiety in the classroom and their concern over their academic performance.

[Nomnian \(2022\)](#) investigated how teachers, staff and postgraduate students reacted to the change from face-to-face instruction to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) and learning during the COVID-19 epidemic. This case study examined a group of ten academic staff members and fourteen postgraduate students enrolled in a Master of Arts program in Language and Intercultural Communication at a Thai research institution. The research identified four essential elements that promote ERT, including faculty staff, postgraduate students, instructional practices and institutional support. [Lekhetho \(2022\)](#) probed nine doctoral students at the University of South Africa (Unisa) regarding their perceptions of the support provided by the supervisors. The study followed a qualitative thematic analysis that proved eventually that the majority of students valued the assistance given, especially from supervisors who skillfully directed them and swiftly offered feedback.

Additionally, [Akhter \(2020\)](#) investigated the problems faced by EFL students in Saudi Arabia because of limited resources. The results of the study showed that students face difficulties with all skills, especially the listening skill due to limited resources. [Alharbi \(2021\)](#) proposed an adopted model for improving the academic writing skills for Saudi postgraduate students, especially those who travel to the United Kingdom (UK) to continue their postgraduation studies (see [Figure 1](#)).

[Al Zumor \(2021\)](#) attempted to explore the linguistic resources of postgraduate linguistic students when constructing their stances in writing academic critique essays. The study was corpus-based. The key findings of the study revealed that the hedges, attitude markers, boosters and self-mentions were the position indicators that were most commonly utilized. In order to comply with accepted norms of academic writing, it is also necessary to improve the

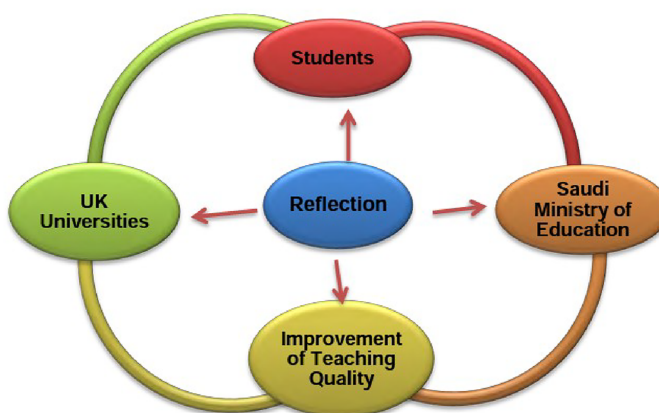


Figure 1. Proposed model to assist Saudi postgraduate students in their English academic writing ([Alharbi, 2021, p. 9](#))

language resources that the students in this particular environment employed to develop their stances. Furthermore, [Ankawi \(2022\)](#) investigated the perspectives of 15 Saudi postgraduate students, continuing their education in New Zealand, on the difficulties of acquiring English academic vocabulary. The study revealed three main difficulties: time constraints as participants struggled to allocate time for reading and writing, lack of prior training and ineffectiveness of incidental learning. [Alawfi \(2022\)](#) examined the linguistic shift (LS) and language maintenance (LM) through the experiences of Saudi postgraduates who had returned home after studying abroad. The results revealed that the preferred language of communication in the home domain for all Saudi postgraduate students returning to and residing in Saudi Arabia is Arabic. The majority of Saudi postgraduate students who return home eventually become fluent in both Arabic and English. The most heartening aspect of this is that they also grow to be a multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural society while preserving their native tongue and fundamental cultural elements, which is sometimes referred to as the transformation of regional Arabic into a universal Arabic.

Furthermore, [Hajar et al. \(2023\)](#) conducted a qualitative study that investigated the challenges, language learning strategies and future vision of postgraduate Kazakh students. All students joined a highly selective EMI university in Kazakhstan. The findings revealed that the participants exhibited an agency and a host of language learning strategies to complete their master's programs. It also revealed that previous English learning experiences have positively influenced and enhanced their capabilities to continue their postgraduation studies. Similar research conducted by [Mutongoza et al. \(2024\)](#) aimed at investigating the influence of English language proficiency in post-colonial African states on research performance of indigenous postgraduate students. The study included 21 participants (nine Ph.D. students, seven Master's students and five supervisors). The study showed that English language proficiency significantly influences the success of postgraduate students and recommended conducting language support programs.

Although all the previous studies investigated the topic of English for postgraduate students, none has explored the role of English in elevating the performance of postgraduate students in relation to four dimensions: knowledge, skills, attitude and psychology and research collectively, especially in the region of Saudi Arabia. Further information regarding data collection, the participants of the study, statistical procedures and research stages and procedures is due in the methodology part.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

To measure the role of English language for postgraduate students in Saudi Universities and manifest its applications and benefits, this self-report study implements a mixed approach design. It was operationalized sequentially, the constructed questionnaire first, then the semi-structured interviews. This is because the utilization of both quantitative and qualitative approaches will allow a better understanding of the results ([Creswell, 2012](#)). To uncover the significance of the study, the English language role was scrutinized in terms of four suggested categories: Knowledge, Skills, Attitude and Psychology and Research. In general, it was a sequential explanatory mixed method research design.

3.2 Stages of the study

The study involved three stages. The first was the identification of the problem which encompassed a review of the problematic situations of English during the journey of postgraduate students in Saudi universities and a thorough review of the literature. The second was the construction of the data-collection instruments and the collection of the data. They were constructed based on the findings of the first stage, then disseminated sequentially with the questionnaire being in the initial phase followed by the interviews. The last stage was the

data analysis and discussion. In this stage, data were analyzed, and a conclusion was finally reached.

3.3 Instruments

In this study, a questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree and Strongly disagree) was constructed and disseminated in order to obtain a clear picture of the participants' demographics and perceptions of the role of English language and its applications in their studies. The questionnaire consists of five sections: the first section (five questions) aims to elicit demographic information about the participants. The following five sections (28 questions) aim to answer the research questions based on the four categories: Knowledge, Skills, Attitude and Psychology and Research. On the other hand, five semi-structured interview questions were designed in an attempt to supplement the questionnaire questions (see [Appendix](#)). The interviews were conducted in separate sessions through the renowned Zoom application and were recorded. Data extracted from the responses of the participants were coded and analyzed to confirm those of the questionnaire based on the main four themes. Finally, results from the questionnaire and the interview were discussed to eventually draw the conclusion of the study.

3.4 Participants of the study

The population of the study included 71 male and female Saudi postgraduate students participated in the questionnaire, 2 were removed due to their inconsistent responses. Students are enrolled in 40 different postgraduate diplomas, masters and Ph.D. majors at 18 different universities located in all 13 regions of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (see [Table 2](#)). A total of 10 participants were selected randomly to join the semi-structured interview sessions. The participants were informed through the consent form that their participation is completely voluntary, and the information obtained will be strictly confidential and anonymous.

3.5 Data analysis

The quantitative data was collected through Google Forms questionnaire. All questions were set with the function "required". Participants were required to complete all questions to submit the survey as a mechanism to avoid incomplete responses. The questionnaire results were then transferred into Excel and SPSS for data analysis. The form was left open to accept responses

Table 2. Distribution of postgraduate students according to demographics

Demographic information	Number	Frequency (%)
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	24	34.8
Female	45	65.2
<i>Age</i>		
Between 21 and 25	6	8.7
Between 26 and 30	29	42.0
Between 31 and 35	23	33.3
Above 35	11	15.9
<i>Postgraduate</i>		
Postgraduate diploma	4	5.8
Master	46	66.7
Ph.D.	19	27.5

Source(s): Table by the author

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for two months. On the other hand, the participants’ responses in the semi-structured interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The data collected using the questionnaire was analyzed using IBM SPSS software package version 20.0. Data were fed into the SPSS and the following statistical tests were used:

- 180
- (1) Participants’ responses towards the questionnaire items in percentages.

(2) Arithmetic mean rank to identify the weight of responses towards the questionnaire items.

(3) Pearson correlation I to ensure the validity of the questionnaire items.

(4) Cronbach’s alpha coefficient (α) to measure the reliability of the questionnaire.

(5) Student *t*-test for normally distributed quantitative variables, to compare between the two groups (males and females) of the study participants.

(6) *F*-test (ANOVA) for normally distributed quantitative variables, to compare between more than two groups.

Subsequent to the analysis of the questionnaire frequencies by the SPSS program, a validity test was conducted. All statements had a significant correlation at the ($p \leq 0.01$) level and none of the item’s correlation was significant at the level ($p \leq 0.05$) which leads to the fact that the questionnaire is valid. In addition, the reliability test of Cronbach Alpha for the 5 sections of the questionnaire were distributed in Table 3. It has revealed the applicability and reliability of the questionnaire. As for the data of the semi-structured interviews, they were reviewed manually and analyzed using the thematic analysis for themes related to the categories of Knowledge, Skills, Attitude and Psychology and Research. Data were also coded, and participants were given symbols and numbers to conceal their identities. “PGS 1”, for instance refers to “Postgraduate Student 1”. The numbers refer to their order in the interview process.

4. Results

This section presents the questionnaire frequencies and the interview responses obtained from postgraduate students in the process of studying postgraduate Diplomas, Masters or Ph.D. programs. All students enrolled in these programs are in Saudi universities.

4.1 Questionnaire frequencies

Tables 4–7 present the questionnaire results following the statistical procedures of the SPSS program. The items were categorized into four tables according to the divisions suggested by the researcher: Knowledge, Skills, Attitude and Psychology and finally Research. A total number of 71 postgraduate students took part in the questionnaire, only 2 were removed for not meeting the selection criteria. The remaining number of participants was 69 postgraduate students.

Table 3. Reliability test results

Questionnaire sections	Cronbach’s alpha	No. of items
Knowledge	0.911	8
Skills	0.952	9
Attitude and psychology	0.899	6
Research	0.914	5

Source(s): Table by the author

Table 4. Distribution of postgraduate students according to knowledge items ($n = 69$)

Q	Knowledge items		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean rank	Direction
1	English is important because most of internationally recognized courses in my field are delivered in English	No. 0 % 0.0	3 4.3	1 1.4	11 15.9	54 78.3		4.68	High
2	English is important because most of the books and references in my field are written in English	No. 3 % 4.3	1 1.4	1 1.4	8 11.6	56 81.2		4.64	High
3	I read research articles and academic blogs that are written in English either to finish my tasks or research	No. 3 % 4.3	2 2.9	2 2.9	8 11.6	54 78.3		4.57	High
4	I always read and use English terminologies related to my field of study	No. 2 % 2.9	2 2.9	3 4.3	8 11.6	54 78.3		4.59	High
5	I attend international conferences and webinars that use English for delivering their content	No. 2 % 2.9	3 4.3	16 23.2	16 23.2	32 46.4		4.06	High
6	I watch academic videos and listen to podcasts that use English to deliver their content	No. 1 % 1.4	4 5.8	7 10.1	23 33.3	34 49.3		4.23	High
7	English is important to improve my knowledge in postgraduate studies	No. 2 % 2.9	0 0.0	2 2.9	6 8.7	59 85.5		4.74	High
8	English is not important to improve my knowledge in postgraduate studies	No. 52 % 75.4	10 14.5	5 7.2	1 1.4	1 1.4		4.61	High

Source(s): Table by the author

Table 4 demonstrates the frequency of the knowledge items in the disseminated questionnaire. Out of 69 participants, 65 participants (94.2%) either agreed or strongly agreed that English is important because most of the internationally recognized courses in their fields are delivered in English. Also, 64 participants (92.8%) reported that English is important because most of the books and references in their disciplines are written in English. A total of 62 participants representing 89.9% approved that they read research articles and academic blogs that are written in English either to finish their tasks or research. The same number confirmed that they always read and use English terminologies related to their fields of study. Moreover, 48 participants constituting 69.6% indicated that they attend international conferences and webinars that use English for delivering their content whereas 16 participants were neutral. A total of 57 participants (82.6%) denoted that they watch academic videos and listen to podcasts that use English to deliver their content. To substantiate the role of English for postgraduate studies in terms of the knowledge items, two reverse questions, items 7 and 8, were added. In item 7, 65 participants comprising 94.2% approved that English is important to improve their knowledge in postgraduate studies only 2 disagreed to the statement and 2 participants remained neutral. In item 8, 62 participants (89.9%) disapproved that English is not important to improve their knowledge in postgraduate studies.

The skills items are represented in Table 5. A total of 60 postgraduate students representing 86.9% indicated that they use English in their postgraduate courses' presentations either in the written or oral form. A total of 56 students (81.2%) approved the fact that English improves some of their soft skills (e.g. communication, decision making) which they use academically.

Table 5. Distribution of postgraduate students according to skills items (*n* = 69)

Q	Skills items		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean rank	Direction
9	I use English in my postgraduate courses' presentations either in the written or oral form	No. 3 % 4.3	2 2.9	4 5.8	13 18.8	47 68.1		4.43	High
10	English improves some of my soft skills (e.g. communication, decision making) which I use academically	No. 1 % 1.4	2 2.9	10 14.5	20 29.0	36 52.2		4.28	High
11	I use English in my research as I write English keywords to look when using academic search engines	No. 2 % 2.9	1 1.4	1 1.4	12 17.4	53 76.8		4.64	High
12	I use English or English terminologies in my academic discussions	No. 3 % 4.3	2 2.9	1 1.4	12 17.4	51 73.9		4.54	High
13	I use English to converse with foreign university instructors	No. 3 % 4.3	3 4.3	1 1.4	9 13.0	53 76.8		4.54	High
14	English improves my academic reading and writing skills because I read a lot of resources and write my postgraduate assignments in English	No. 2 % 2.9	2 2.9	2 2.9	10 14.5	53 76.8		4.59	High
15	English improves my listening skills because I listen to lectures, podcasts and other learning resources for postgraduate studies	No. 2 % 2.9	1 1.4	4 5.8	18 26.1	44 63.8		4.46	High
16	English <i>improves</i> my skills in postgraduate studies	No. 2 % 2.9	1 1.4	5 7.2	14 20.3	47 68.1		4.49	High
17	English <i>does not improve</i> my skills in postgraduate studies	No. 47 % 68.1	13 18.8	7 10.1	2 2.9	0 0.0		4.52	High

Source(s): Table by the author

Furthermore, 65 participants (94.2%) confirmed that they use English for in their research as they use English key words to look for knowledge on academic search engines. A total of 63 participants (91.3%) indicated that they use English or English terminologies in their academic discussions and 62 participants (89.8%) use English to converse with foreign university instructors. Added to that, 63 participants representing 91.3% either agreed or strongly agreed that English improves their academic reading and writing skills because they read a lot of resources and write their postgraduate assignments in English. A total of 62 participants (89.9%) reported that English improves their listening skills because they listen to lectures, podcasts and other learning resources for postgraduate studies. Items 16 and 17 are in reverse to each other to verify the role of English in enhancing the skills of postgraduate students. In item, 16, 61 postgraduate students constituting 88.4% asserted that English improves their skills in postgraduate studies and in item 17 almost the same number disapproved that English does not improve their skills in postgraduate studies.

Table 6 represents the role of English with reference to postgraduate students' attitude and psychology. A total of 55 participants representing 79.7% approved that Knowing and using English enhances their cultural understanding and tolerance, especially if they have classmates

Table 6. Distribution of postgraduate students according to attitude and psychology items ($n = 69$)

Q	Attitude and psychology items		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean rank	Direction
18	Knowing and using English enhances my cultural understanding and tolerance, especially if I have classmates from foreign backgrounds	No. 1 % 1.4	1 1.4	12 17.4	18 26.1	37 53.6	4.29	High	
19	Knowing and using English improves my self-confidence and self-esteem because I know how to use it for my academic skills	No. 1 % 1.4	2 2.9	8 11.6	18 26.1	40 58.0	4.36	High	
20	I feel motivated to take part in discussions and international conferences if my English is good enough	No. 1 % 1.4	3 4.3	3 4.3	11 15.9	51 73.9	4.57	High	
21	Knowing and using English motivates me to improve and construct my knowledge	No. 0 % 0.0	0 0.0	5 7.2	18 26.1	46 66.7	4.59	High	
22	Knowing and using English improves my attitude towards my academic studies	No. 1 % 1.4	2 2.9	5 7.2	15 21.7	46 66.7	4.49	High	
23	Knowing and using English does not improve my attitude towards my academic studies	No. 48 % 69.6	15 21.7	5 7.2	1 1.4	0 0.0	4.59	High	

Source(s): Table by the author**Table 7.** Distribution of postgraduate students according to research items ($n = 69$)

Q	Research items		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean rank	Direction
24	English is important for writing and publishing research articles and posters because it is the language of science today	No. 1 % 1.4	1 1.4	3 4.3	10 14.5	54 78.3	4.67	High	
25	I use English to write research proposals	No. 2 % 2.9	2 2.9	2 2.9	10 14.5	53 76.8	4.59	High	
26	English is important for writing academic reports and case studies	No. 1 % 1.4	0 0.0	2 2.9	15 21.7	51 73.9	4.67	High	
27	English <i>enhances</i> my research skills in postgraduate studies	No. 2 % 2.9	1 1.4	2 2.9	15 21.7	49 71.0	4.57	High	
28	English <i>does not enhance</i> my research skills in postgraduate studies	No. 48 % 69.6	16 23.2	3 4.3	2 2.9	0 0.0	4.59	High	

Source(s): Table by the author

from foreign backgrounds. Also, 58 participants constituting 84.1% confirmed that knowing and using English improves their self-confidence and self-esteem because they know how to use it for my academic skills. A total of 62 participants comprising 89.8% pointed out that they feel motivated to take part in discussions and international conferences if their English is good enough. Added to that, 64 participants (92.8%) confirmed that knowing and using English motivates them to improve and construct their knowledge. Items 22 and 23 are reversed to confirm the role of English in terms of postgraduate students' attitude and psychology. In item 22, 61 participants (88.4%) approved that knowing and using English improves their attitude towards their academic studies whereas in item 23, 63 participants (91.3%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed that knowing and using English does not improve their attitude towards their academic studies.

Table 7 illustrates the questionnaire frequencies in respect to the role of English in research for postgraduate students. Out of the total number of participants, 64 participants representing 92.8% revealed that English is important for writing and publishing research articles and posters because it is the language of science today. A total of 63 participants comprising 91.3% stated that they use English to write research proposals. Additionally, 66 participants (95.6%) approved that English is important for writing academic reports and case studies. As for the reversed items 27 and 28, 64 participants representing 92.7% either agreed or strongly agreed that English enhances their research skills in postgraduate studies and the same number disapproved that English does not enhance their research skills in postgraduate studies.

Table 8 presents the relation between the overall findings of the questionnaire and the demographic information relevant to the gender, age and postgraduate degree programs. Following the application of the students *t*-test, there was no significant difference ($p \geq 0.05$) in the perspectives and English role awareness of participants in terms of their gender. There was also no significant difference ($p \geq 0.05$) in the views of participants in terms of their age and postgraduate degree program. On the grounds of that, it is apparent that demographic information has no relation with participants' perspectives regarding the role of English in enhancing their postgraduate studies.

Table 8. Relation between average score of overall findings and demographic information ($n = 69$)

Demographic items	Number	Average score of overall findings Mean \pm SD	Test of Sig	<i>p</i>
<i>Gender</i>				
Male	24	4.65 \pm 0.62	<i>t</i> = 1.170	0.246
Female	45	4.45 \pm 0.69		
<i>Age</i>				
Between 21 and 25	6	4.13 \pm 0.94	<i>F</i> = 1.536	0.214
Between 26 and 30	29	4.62 \pm 0.46		
Between 31 and 35	23	4.61 \pm 0.87		
Above 35	11	4.29 \pm 0.37		
<i>Postgraduate degree programs</i>				
Postgraduate diploma	4	4.88 \pm 0.11	<i>F</i> = 1.061	0.352
Master	46	4.55 \pm 0.70		
Ph.D.	19	4.37 \pm 0.65		

Source(s): Table by the author

4.2 Interview responses

Responses of the interviews confirmed the findings of the questionnaire frequencies as all participants selected “yes” for the first question except for PGS 10 as his studies do not involve English as a language of instruction. This posits the notion that English has a major and contributive role to play in the various types of postgraduate studies (e.g. diplomas, masters, Ph.D.s). This role has been mapped by the researcher and hypothesized according to the uses of English in postgraduate studies. In doing so, the researcher categorized the uses of English for postgraduate students in four paths: knowledge, skills, attitude and research.

In the second question of the interview which is concerned with the uses of English in the acquisition of knowledge, PGS 1 who is pursuing a master’s degree in cyber security stated “As soon as I arrive to campus the only language I hear, and use is English. 80% of my professors are foreigners. The courses I’ve enrolled in so far are all in English.” Yet, PGS 2 who studies master’s in business administration corroborated that stating “All the courses I took and will take are in English. The books and resources I use are all in English. The instructors teach us in English. So, it is very important to understand English, otherwise I won’t be able to pass.” PGS 6 added that “I had to improve my English language because I know it’s the key to be familiar with the terminologies and comprehend what I will read.” Which leads to the fact that the knowledge of English terminologies is central to move further in any discipline. Moreover, PGS 8 developed a course of action in an attempt to address his lack of English proficiency reporting that “The first thing I did is joining English for specific purposes classes to make sure I am aware of all the terminology I will encounter during my studies. Then I tried to create my own library of specialized references and resources and started to assign 3 h every day for reading. This helped me a lot in building my knowledge and being literate.” The statement of PGS 8 embeds that knowing English is conducive to knowledge acquisition. On another side, knowing English is not only important for knowledge acquisition but also for knowledge dissemination. In proving that, PGS 9 states “I have a YouTube channel which has many English-speaking followers. So, I started to broadcast both English and Arabic videos.”

As for the enhancement of postgraduate skills, English is also essential. In this sense, PGS 1 states that “Having English as the main language while studying my postgraduate degree, I have to master the language before starting my studies. It took me almost one year to improve my language skills in order to get a good score in IELTS.” Moreover, PGS 4 reports that “One of my professors is from UK and the only way I can communicate with him is English. To do all my academic commitments I have to use and practice all these skills.” which accentuates the instrumental role played by the English language in potent communication through reading, writing, listening and speaking. Even with presentations and academic discussions, English is predominantly used as unveiled by PGS 9 “Whenever I present or write or discuss I use English language.” Not only does English improves knowledge and skills, but also transforms attitude towards professionalism, the acquisition of knowledge and learners’ positive cognitive perceptions of achievements and success. A salient instance on this is what has been mentioned by PGS 1 confirming that “Mastering English language gave me confidence in myself. However, not having a native like make me shy when I have to talk in front of my colleagues in presentations.” Another fine example is PGS 2’s statement “I will be participating in a conference next month and having good language speaking skills gives me enough confidence for the presentation.” English also motivates postgraduate students to seek and share knowledge as stated by PGS 3 “English makes me more encouraged to participate in international conferences.” And PGS 4 “I can now share the knowledge I have with my Peers”. In essence, English increases postgraduate’ motivation to explore the uncharted realms of knowledge, enhances confidence to participate eagerly in discussions and conferences and ameliorates cultural tolerance as PGS 2 reported “All my instructors are Americans, and it was a good chance to get to know them”.

With reference to scientific research, English can assist with writing and publishing of research articles, grant proposals, research posters and any academic documents (e.g. case studies). Constituting a problem, English may be a reason for rejection from postgraduate

studies in many universities around the globe as PGS 5 reports “*Weak writing can lead to failure, and that made me work on my writing to make it very good.*” PGS 7 adds “*I had to learn how to write in an academic way. Sometimes I got low grades only because my writing is not good enough. So, I decided to work on that and improve my writing.*” PGS 9 confirms this stating “*I write reports and research papers. I just finished writing my first poster and I just sent a research proposal to the supervisor who will work with me during the Ph.D.*”.

5. Discussion

In response to the research questions, the results obtained from the questionnaire initially then the interview subsequently, affirmed that English plays a significant role in academic life of Saudi postgraduate students. The students perceived English as an essential component of their studies for its involvement in constructing and developing their knowledge, enhancing their study skills, optimizing their attitude and psychology towards learning and finally motivating them to engage more in scientific and academic research. Moreover, the several uses of English language mentioned in the previous section confirms the major role it plays in the postgraduate students’ academic journey.

Based on the literature review, data collection and analysis, it was clearly confirmed that English language proficiency is a critical factor for postgraduate students in Saudi universities contributing either to their success or failure in their previously selected programs. The rationale for this is that it encompasses a significant number of universities’ courses in various disciplines. In this sense, knowledge of postgraduate students cannot be constructed except with solid competence of English. Apart from universities courses, students attain, foster and cultivate their knowledge by means of miscellaneous resources (e.g. conference, videos, podcasts, books, academic articles), all of which capitalize on English as a medium of communication to impart knowledge, especially if these resources are internationally recognized and published to reach a considerable number of knowledge seekers or scholars. Comprehending, evaluating and citing these resources require the acquisition of advanced vocabulary, internalization of complicated grammatical structures and language functions as well as employing them in contextualized academic conversations. Additionally, it requires the formation and development of learning strategies employed to enhance reading, listening, writing and speaking skills. Thus, this study identifies the broad applications of English for postgraduate students in relation to knowledge, skills, attitude and psychology and finally research (see Table 9).

Table 9. English applications and benefits categorization for postgraduate students

Knowledge	Skills	Attitude and psychology	Research
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• International courses• Field-specific books• Research articles• Academic blogs• Filed-specific terminologies• International conferences and webinars• Social Media Videos and Podcasts (e.g. YouTube)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Presentation skills• Soft skills• Research skills• Academic discussions• Conversations with foreigners• Reading skills• Writing skills• Listening skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Enhance cultural tolerance and understanding• Improves self-confidence and self-esteem• Encourage taking part in discussion• Motivate learners to attend conferences• Motivate learners to search for knowledge and improve skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Writing articles• Publish articles• Grant proposals• Research posters• Academic documents (reports and case studies)

Source(s): Table by the author

The current study confirms and extends the results of previous studies (e.g. [Ahmed et al., 2017](#); [Liu and Xiangming, 2019](#); [Akhter, 2020](#); [Alharbi, 2021](#); [Nomnian, 2022](#)) and adds significant findings to the existing literature. It is perspicuous that since English is today's world lingua franca, it effectuates and enhances cultural understanding and tolerance through appropriate communication and usage of the language.

Being proficient in English ensures this process takes place in universities, especially for postgraduate students. This comes as a result of the multicultural and multinational nature of postgraduation studies environment, especially in Saudi universities. There are numerous students enrolled in Islamic studies and other courses from all over the world as well as foreign instructors teaching courses in various disciplines. Furthermore, English proficiency ameliorates self-confidence and self-esteem and encourages participations in academic discussions. It also motivates students to take part in international conferences as well as searching for knowledge everywhere. With reference to academic research, writing and publishing studies, grant proposals, posters and miscellaneous academic documents (e.g. reports, case studies) necessitates knowing and mastering academic writing in English. Otherwise, these documents are not to be published or approved globally. Simply put, it is a ticket to success and a gateway to excellence.

The findings confirm that mastering another language can influence the cultural heritage of a country, and in the case of Saudi Arabia, learners may adopt the culture and traditions associated with the target language. This can lead to acculturation and may negatively affect their cultural identity, especially given the dominance of English. Therefore, the process of improving English proficiency for postgraduate students must be implemented carefully to ensure that cultural identity is preserved while still fostering language skills.

6. Conclusion

The study has investigated the role of English in enhancing the performance of postgraduate students in Saudi universities and mapped its applications through examining their perspectives on the topic of study. In essence, postgraduate students perceive English as an essential component of their studies for its involvement in constructing their knowledge, honing their skills, optimizing their attitude and psychology towards knowledge and finally encouraging them to conduct scientific and academic research. The study confirms and extends the findings of previous studies (e.g. [Ahmed et al., 2017](#); [Liu and Xiangming, 2019](#); [Akhter, 2020](#); [Alharbi, 2021](#); [Nomnian, 2022](#)) and adds to the existing literature. The study findings should be considered by Postgraduate programs planners and developers to take practical actions to enhance postgraduate students' English language Proficiency. Therefore, it is recommended to conduct needs assessments for postgraduate students in various colleges at Saudi universities as well as other universities in the Arab world to design and develop effective learning materials and resources that target the core uses of English in postgraduate programs. Since the findings of this study cannot be generalized because of small size of participants, future research may investigate larger groups including postgraduate students from different nationalities studying in Saudi Arabia.

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Appendix

Semi-structured interview

- 1- Does English help improve your skills in postgraduate studies? (Yes – Maybe – No)
- 2- Which of the following do you use English for in terms of your knowledge? Please explain how?
 - a) International Courses
 - b) Filed-specific Books
 - c) Research Articles
 - d) Academic Blogs
 - e) Filed-specific Terminologies
 - f) International Conferences and Webinars
 - g) Social Media Videos and Podcasts (e.g. YouTube)
- 3- Which of the following do you use English for in terms of your skills? Please explain how?
 - a) Presentation Skills
 - b) Soft Skills
 - c) Research Skills
 - d) Academic Discussions
 - e) Conversations with Foreigners
 - f) Reading Skills
 - g) Writing Skills
 - h) Listening Skills
- 4- Which of the following do you use English for in terms of your attitude and psychology? Please explain how?
 - a) Enhances Cultural Tolerance and Understanding
 - b) Improves self-confidence and self-esteem
 - c) Encourages taking part in discussion
 - d) Motivates Learners to attend conferences

e) Motivates learners to search for Knowledge and Improve Skills

5- Which of the following do you use English for in terms of your research skills? Please explain how?

a) Writing Articles

b) Publish Articles

c) Grant Proposals

d) Research Posters

e) Academic Documents (Reports and Case studies)

Source(s): Author's own work.

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